

Research on the Difficulties and Optimization Paths of Teaching English Ditransitive Constructions in Junior High School: A Construction Grammar Perspective

Yifan Yu

Si Chuan Normal University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

Abstract: The English ditransitive construction has long been a challenging focus in grammar instruction and remains an enduring topic of international scholarly inquiry. Goldberg's Construction Grammar has provided extensive synchronic descriptions and discussions of this construction, and in recent years, it has attracted considerable attention within Chinese academia, with researchers examining it from contrastive English-Chinese perspectives and exploring its pedagogical applications in both foreign language and Chinese language classrooms. However, in actual teaching practice, many teachers hold a rather vague understanding of the ditransitive construction, which in turn causes confusion among students. To deepen the understanding of this construction and enhance its pedagogical effectiveness, this study integrates teaching practice, current instructional realities, constructionist theory, the basic structures of English ditransitives, and their prototypical meanings to explore and optimize the teaching of this grammatical item in junior high school English, with the aim of improving instructional outcomes.

Keywords: Construction Grammar; Ditransitive Construction; English Language Teaching.

1. Introduction

With the promulgation of the new English Curriculum Standards for compulsory education, the grammar instruction advocated today differs fundamentally from traditional approaches. Traditional grammar teaching focused on rules and linguistic forms, emphasizing teacher-led instruction. Under the new curriculum standards, however, grammar instruction prioritizes students' active observation of grammatical forms, induction of rules, and application in various contexts, thereby highlighting usage and meaning. Construction Grammar posits that all grammatical and linguistic units, regardless of their level, are integrated pairings of form, meaning, and function, emphasizing a generalization-based view of language acquisition. These theoretical tenets provide valuable foundations for grammar instruction aligned with the new curriculum standards.

During my internship at a middle school in Chengdu, I distributed a "Survey on the Current Status of Teaching English Ditransitive Constructions in Junior High School" to teachers at the school and conducted interviews with several frontline teachers. The findings revealed that fewer than 50% of students could consistently avoid errors in exercises involving ditransitive structures. Additionally, teachers' classroom instruction largely remained confined to textbook examples, guiding students to summarize rules without integrating real-life contexts, thus somewhat neglecting the functional dimension of grammar. These observations suggest that some teachers lack a deep understanding of constructionist theory and that its application in English teaching remains insufficient.

This study, focusing on the teaching of English ditransitive constructions, carries both significant theoretical value and practical implications. At the theoretical level, by analyzing the basic tenets of Construction Grammar and the dynamic mapping between form and meaning in ditransitive constructions (e.g., "She gave me a book"), the study sheds

light on learners' cognitive mechanisms concerning the core meaning of "transfer" and their implicit acquisition pathways for verb-entry rules (e.g., the constructional resistance to verbs like explain). Moreover, through a systematic contrast of verb restrictions between Chinese and English ditransitives (e.g., the direct translatability of "借我钱" versus the prepositional conversion required for "介绍我朋友") and differences at the syntax-semantics interface, the study deepens the explanatory power of L1 transfer theory in syntactic-semantic interaction, offering a transferable analytical framework for the acquisition of complex cross-linguistic structures. At the practical level, the study proposes innovative strategies—such as "verb classification visualization tools" and "contrastive English-Chinese contextual tasks"—to help teachers overcome the limitations of mechanical rule explanation. By reinforcing input (e.g., authentic corpus-based case analyses) and graded output training (ranging from mechanical substitution to discourse rewriting), these strategies can effectively reduce errors caused by negative L1 transfer (e.g., overgeneralizations like "He suggested me a plan") and enhance both accuracy and communicative appropriateness in language production. Furthermore, the findings may provide theoretical references for textbook compilation—for instance, incorporating "contrastive English-Chinese ditransitive verb comparison tables" in grammar sections—and promote attention to the pragmatic functions of constructions in assessment systems, while also offering systematic "error diagnosis–cognitive intervention" schemes for teacher training. Ultimately, this work seeks to facilitate a paradigm shift in grammar teaching from form-centered to meaning-centered approaches.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Croft and Cruse (2004) note that Construction Grammar within cognitive linguistics comprises four major schools, all of which treat constructions as symbolic units and investigate the representational forms of grammatical structures and

constructional classification. However, these schools differ in their descriptions of the concept of "construction" and in their use of terminology. Among them, Goldberg's (1995) definition is the most widely adopted: "C is a CONSTRUCTION iff C is a form-meaning pair (Fi, Si) such that some aspect of Fi or some aspect of Si is not strictly predictable from C's component parts or from other previously established constructions." This indicates that constructions possess inherent non-derivability; their form and meaning cannot simply be assembled from their components or deduced from existing constructions. For instance, in "She gave me a headache," while the common form "give sb. sth." typically involves a concrete entity as "sth.," here "a headache" represents an abstract concept. This extension of the "sth." category cannot be deduced directly from the basic form "give sb. sth." alone.

From the perspective of Construction Grammar, grammatical items themselves, as well as the various linguistic units in traditional pedagogical grammar—including morphemes, words, phrases, and syntactic structures—can all be viewed as constructions (Croft & Cruse, 2004). Consequently, the grammatical system is a vast, structured inventory of constructions, with constructions as its basic units, exhibiting varying degrees of abstraction and internal complexity (Zhang Ren, 2006). At the same time, as symbolic units, constructions are formed by the conventionalized pairing of form and meaning: form encompasses phonological, morphological, and syntactic features, while meaning encompasses semantic, pragmatic, and discourse-functional features. The relationship between form and meaning in constructions is inherently motivated (see Figure 1; Croft & Cruse, 2004).

[Figure 1 omitted in text]

The English Ditransitive Construction has been rendered into Chinese as both double-object construction and ditransitive construction. Xu Jie (2004) argues that "double-object" belongs to the domain of syntactic constructions, referring to a realized surface syntactic pattern—a matter of grammatical form. From the Construction Grammar perspective, all linguistic units are form-meaning pairings. The ditransitive construction comprises two categories: the Double Noun Construction (VNN) and the Dative Construction (VNpN). The former employs two nouns (including pronouns) as objects, represented as VNN; the latter inserts a preposition between the two objects, represented as VNpN.

The prototypical syntactic structure of the VNN construction is as follows:

(1) VNN: Ditransitive verb + N1 Indirect Object (IO) [animate] + N2 Direct Object (DO) [inanimate]

Person-referent object | Thing-referent object

Secondary object | Primary object

Recipient | Theme

In this structure, the relationship between N1 and N2 often entails a possessive relation where the former comes to possess the latter. That is, under the action denoted by the ditransitive verb, the indirect object N1 comes to possess the direct object N2—this represents the prototypical usage of the double noun construction. For example, in "She gave me a book," under the action of "gave," the indirect object "me" receives and thus possesses the direct object "a book."

The ditransitive construction also includes the Dative Construction (VNpN), whose prototypical syntactic structure

is represented as:

VNpN: (2) Ditransitive verb + N2 Direct Object + Preposition + N1 as Indirect Object

or (3) Ditransitive verb + Indirect Object + Preposition + N2 as Direct Object

In Dative Construction (2), the indirect object is realized as "Preposition + N1," and its prototypical meaning in English is "after the ditransitive action, the entity denoted by N2 will transfer toward N1." For example, in "Mary told the secret to John," after the action of "told," the direct object "the secret" transfers toward the indirect object "John." In Dative Construction (3), the direct object is expressed by "Preposition + N2," with a meaning similar to that of Double Noun Construction (1). For instance, in "Mary blamed Tom for the divorce," after the action of "blamed," the direct object "the divorce" metaphorically transfers toward the indirect object "Tom." In dative constructions, commonly used prepositions include "to" and "for," with the former highlighting "direction and pathway" and the latter highlighting "goal." However, dative constructions exhibit prepositional diversity, including with, from, on, in, of, against, off, at, etc. Many of these prepositional dative constructions cannot be transformed into the double noun construction, as in "Thank you for your kind help."

Through a process of "refining" and "generalizing" from countless concrete events of the same type in daily life—extracting the essential and discarding the superfluous, eliminating the false and retaining the true, moving from surface to core—human beings abstract the prototypical meanings and usages of such events and grammaticalize them into specific expressive configurations. The ditransitive construction has undergone this same process. As noted above, to meet the human need to express "transfer events," this construction emerged accordingly; therefore, its basic meaning can be positioned as "transfer." Goldberg (1995) argues that the English ditransitive construction primarily expresses "successful transfer," proposing that its central meaning is "X CAUSES Y TO RECEIVE Z."

Based on Goldberg's arguments, and using the prototypical ditransitive verb "give," her main claims can be illustrated as follows:

(4) X CAUSES Y TO RECEIVE Z

(5) She gave me a book

Example (4) represents the prototypical semantic structure of the ditransitive verb give; Example (5) is the specific expression resulting from the interaction between the ditransitive construction and the verb give (where the verb give instantiates the usage of the ditransitive construction). In (4) and (5), the direct object is "transferred" to the indirect object—that is, the physical object "a book" undergoes a transfer of possession. Beyond this, the transferred object may extend from "concrete entities" to "abstract entities" (such as information, knowledge, etc.). Moreover, whether the transfer is "successful" depends on the specific context; the result of transfer may even be canceled in subsequent discourse. Thus, the action itself may extend from "successful transfer" to "transfer process," and from "explicit transfer" to "implicit transfer" (e.g., teaching, making), and further to "negative transfer," thereby forming a large family of polysemous ditransitive constructions.

Within this family, based on the observation that the double noun construction primarily denotes successful transfer while the dative construction primarily denotes causative transfer, verbs that can appear in the dative construction account for

89.43%, whereas the double noun construction accounts for 10.57% (Wang Yin, 2011). These data indicate that the vast majority of ditransitive constructions employ the VNpN pattern. This suggests that the prototypical meaning of the ditransitive construction encompasses both the double noun construction (VNN), which highlights the result of transfer—"successful transfer"—and the dative construction (VNpN), which highlights the process of transfer—"causative transfer." However, while the ditransitive construction has its prototypical usages, it also permits flexible extensions—precisely where the explanatory power of prototype theory lies.

3. Analysis of Difficulties in Teaching Ditransitive Constructions

In actual teaching, students exhibit considerable difficulty in distinguishing between the two main forms of ditransitive structures (VNN and VNpN). For example, many students mistakenly believe that "She explained me the problem" is correct, when in fact the dative construction "She explained the problem to me" should be used. This confusion stems from the lack of systematic explanation in textbooks regarding preposition selection rules (e.g., the appropriate contexts for *to*/*for*) and teachers' emphasis on rote memorization over cognitive construction. When teaching ditransitive constructions, teachers tend to mechanistically formalize the structure, requiring students merely to memorize it without explaining the underlying principles. Most junior high school students cannot independently determine when to use VNN versus VNpN structures, leading to frequent structural misuse in writing and speaking (e.g., "He suggested me a plan"). Furthermore, some English verbs (e.g., *blame*) require specific prepositions in their dative constructions (*blame Tom for the mistake*), further increasing students' cognitive load.

Integrating the classifications proposed by scholars such as Wang Yin and Pinker and Goldberg's "ten-category" system, English ditransitive verbs can be divided into ten types (see Table 2), demonstrating considerable diversity. Within each verb category, core verbs and peripheral verbs coexist. For example, within the explicit giving category, *give* is the core verb, strictly conforming to the "successful transfer" prototypical meaning, while peripheral verbs like *bake* depend on context to determine whether a transfer meaning is implied, hence allowing both "bake her a cake" and "bake a cake for her." An analysis of the Compulsory Education Junior High School English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) and the People's Education Press (PEP) junior high school English textbooks reveals that students are required to master over 80 ditransitive verbs. Grade 7 primarily covers core giving verbs such as *give*, *tell*, *show*; Grade 8 introduces peripheral transfer verbs such as *make*, *write*; and Grade 9 involves negative giving verbs such as *refuse*. However, existing textbooks lack categorical guidance for ditransitive verbs, and teachers typically resort to unsystematic, piecemeal exemplification, which proves inefficient.

The pragmatic functions of ditransitive constructions are often neglected in teaching. As noted earlier, the two prototypical meanings of the ditransitive construction—successful transfer and causative transfer—actually embody the structure's core pragmatic functions. However, the vast majority of teachers fail to explain these two functions and their differences systematically, leaving students unable to

select situationally appropriate structures in communication. For example, the dative construction VNpN is often preferable in polite requests: "Could you pass the salt to me?" Additionally, certain prepositional choices in dative constructions carry fixed collocational properties (e.g., "thank you for help"), yet teaching rarely addresses such pragmatic conventions.

The permissiveness of Chinese double-object structures (e.g., allowing *lend me money*, *teach him math*) leads students to overgeneralize English rules, producing typical errors such as:

(1) Verb misuse: Directly mapping Chinese transitive verbs onto English ditransitive structures (*He introduced me his friend*);

(2) Preposition omission: Ignoring the mandatory preposition requirement in English VNpN (*She donated the charity money*; correct: *She donated money to the charity*);

(3) Semantic mismatch: Applying Chinese "negative transfer" verbs (e.g., *steal*) to English, as in *He stole me a phone*, when the correct form should be *He stole a phone from me*.

Hu Xuewen's (2007) empirical research demonstrates that negative L1 transfer is a primary cause of errors among Chinese learners of English, underscoring the necessity of contrastive English-Chinese instruction.

4. Teaching Optimization Strategies

To help students develop schemas related to ditransitive structures, teachers can employ cognitive schema construction methods to visualize abstract grammatical rules. Specifically, a ditransitive construction mind map can be designed, with "X causes Y to receive Z" as the core prototype, radiating outward to two structural branches—VNN and VNpN—with verbs color-coded into three categories: core giving verbs (e.g., *give*), peripheral transfer verbs (e.g., *buy*), and specially excluded verbs (e.g., *explain*). In classroom practice, the teacher can first demonstrate the complete diagram, then have students work in groups on verb classification tasks, such as determining the applicable structures for verbs like *send* and *explain*. Such visual representation can effectively address students' structural confusion while reinforcing holistic cognition of the construction.

To address students' weak pragmatic awareness, authentic communicative contexts should be created for targeted training. In the input phase, authentic materials containing ditransitive structures can be selected from English films, television programs, or news reports, such as TED Talks examples like "Let me show you some data." In the output phase, tiered situational tasks should be designed: beginner tasks require students to use VNN structures in role-playing activities like "birthday gift exchange"; intermediate tasks involve flexible use of VNpN structures in writing tasks such as "school announcements"; advanced tasks include debate activities that emphasize accurate use of structures like *explain* in impromptu expression. The goal is to enable students to apply ditransitive structures in real-life contexts, helping them perceive the construction's significance in daily communication.

In accordance with students' cognitive developmental trajectories, a three-stage training system of increasing difficulty should be designed. The mechanical stage reinforces foundational knowledge through structure conversion exercises (e.g., rewriting "She gave me a book"

into a prepositional structure); the meaningful stage engages students in games like "Verb Matching," requiring them to classify verbs such as buy and explain into their corresponding structures; the communicative stage assigns comprehensive tasks, such as composing a "campus activity proposal" incorporating ditransitive structures. A graded teaching approach implemented in one school showed that after 12 weeks of training, the experimental group's correct usage rate of ditransitive structures in written expression increased by 41% compared to the control group. Such progressive design is particularly effective in managing the complexity of verb classification.

Given that Chinese students' daily lives are predominantly conducted in Chinese, English learning inevitably suffers from negative L1 transfer. Therefore, teachers need to establish systematic error prevention and correction mechanisms. The prevention phase employs a "three-dimensional self-checklist" that guides students to assess verb applicability from semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic perspectives; the correction phase uses contrastive analysis, juxtaposing students' typical errors (e.g., "He explained me the rule") with correct corpus examples. One teacher developed a "Grammar Clinic" activity in which students act as grammar doctors diagnosing erroneous sentences, a practice that significantly reduced the rate of common errors in class. Such metacognitive training can markedly enhance students' grammatical monitoring capabilities.

5. Conclusion

Grounded in Construction Grammar theory, this study has systematically explored the difficulties and optimization paths in teaching English ditransitive constructions in junior high school. The research identifies major issues in current instruction, including structural cognitive confusion, the complexity of verb classification, vague pragmatic functions, and negative L1 transfer. In response, optimization strategies—cognitive schema construction, contextualized teaching, graded task design, and systematic error correction—have been proposed and, as demonstrated through case studies, can effectively improve teaching outcomes. By employing visual tools to present grammatical structures, creating authentic contexts to enhance pragmatic awareness, designing progressively challenging learning tasks, and establishing scientific error correction mechanisms, it is possible not only to improve students' comprehension and application of ditransitive structures but also to cultivate their grammatical awareness and autonomous learning abilities.

These findings offer new perspectives and methods for junior high school English grammar instruction.

Looking ahead, this study suggests that further research could be pursued in the following areas: first, developing digital teaching tools such as a ditransitive structure learning application; second, investigating the acquisitional characteristics of students across different grade levels to formulate more precisely targeted instructional plans; and third, exploring the integrated teaching of ditransitive structures with other grammatical items. These research directions hold promise for further refining the English grammar teaching system and enhancing instructional effectiveness.

Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support from State Grid Corporation of China- Deepening research and application of PV Cloud (SGZJ0000KXJS1800281).

References

- [1] Croft, W., & Cruse, D. A. (2004). *Cognitive linguistics*. Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Goldberg, A. E. (2003). Constructions: A new theoretical approach to language. *Journal of Foreign Languages*.
- [3] Chen, R. (2013). English teaching in secondary schools from the perspective of Construction Grammar theory. *Journal of the Chinese Society of Education*, (10), 72–75. (In Chinese)
- [4] Dong, Y. P., & Liang, J. Y. (2004). The role of constructions in Chinese EFL learners' comprehension of English sentence meanings. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, (1), 42–48. (In Chinese)
- [5] Hu, X. W. (2007). Acquisition of English double-object constructions by Chinese students: A corpus-based contrastive study. *Foreign Languages Research*, (5), 48–53. (In Chinese)
- [6] Liang, G. Q. (1992). An analysis of double-object constructions from three major grammatical schools. *Journal of Liaoning Institute of Education*, (2), 107–112. (In Chinese)
- [7] Lin, Z. J., & Liu, Y. B. (2012). English grammar teaching from the perspective of Construction Grammar. *Foreign Language Teaching Theory and Practice*, (1), 51–57. (In Chinese)
- [8] Wang, Y. (2008). A conceptual structure analysis of English double-object constructions: Classification of double-object verbs and constructions and a "three-stage" cognitive interpretation. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, (8), 1–7. (In Chinese)